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EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF UN SECRETARIAT

Joseph CONNOR, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Administration and Management and Chairman of the Efficiency Board, discusses the findings and recommendations of its first report on the efficiency and effectiveness of the UN Secretariat. Mr. Connor highlights the achievements and outlines the steps to be taken in the future. The work of the Secretariat is being streamlined through a number of measures and reforms that will enhance the performance of the Organization and make it more cost effective.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Better service, better value, better management. These are the main objectives of a report recently issued by the Efficiency Board established to look into ways and means to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the United Nations Secretariat. How can the world organization realize these aims, and at what cost to its work and staff?

With us today to discuss the report is Joseph Connor, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Administration and Management and Chairman of the Efficiency Board. Joining me to talk with Mr. Connor are Bhaskar Menon of the International Documents Review and Barbara Crossette of The New York Times.

Mr. Connor, welcome to World Chronicle.

CONNOR: Thank you very much.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Under-Secretary-General, after Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, you are the top manager of the UN. So, in a way, it could be argued that this report is a measure of self criticism. Is that the case?

CONNOR: Oh, I think a deep measure is probably a better expression. It's really a deep look at how we can respond, first of all, to a budget reduction without cutting back the degree of services. As a matter of fact, can we improve them at the same time? It sounds like a contradiction, but in fact I think we've done that, in a number of areas, and we've created the will to do it by asking people "How can you do the job that you've been doing better?" We all know something's wrong with it.

LITTLEJOHNS: The UN is 51 years old; how did this situation develop? How did it get so much out of hand? Was it a series of mismanagements, or is it simply because of the financial predicament of Member States not paying their dues? What is the basis of the current, quote, "mess", unquote?

CONNOR: Well, I think that the unquote is probably the better part of that statement, Michael. All Governments—we're not a Government, but we're like one—in the last four or five years have heard a message: do it for less, and do it better. The United States Government, through its "reinventing government" project, has cut 273,000—

LITTLEJOHNS: Al Gore's baby.

CONNOR: That's right. —273,000 civilians from the payroll, 10%. So we followed along the British line, the Fijian line, the New Zealand approach, the American approach—we're doing exactly the same thing. Everybody can work a little bit harder and do it a little bit better. I don't think we're different. Probably a little later in starting. And

that may be an advantage because we tapped into their experience, used their technology, and did the work by combining experts who have gone through that transformation in their own national Governments with our people who ultimately have to actually do the job.

LITTLEJOHNS: Excuse me, I'm having trouble with my throat. You're a former boss of Price Waterhouse, the accounting giant, and you have a great reputation as an accountant. What would you have done in the UN system had you come on board a lot sooner?

CONNOR: Well, I think there are three or four elements that I'd turn my attention to first. Clearly, we needed better information to manage. How can you correct something if you don't know what's going on? So we put in a new computer system and, some may think it's a miracle, but it actually works. And we did better than most Governments in that. We reformed our personnel activities by first installing career planning, really a hard rock evaluation of who are the good performers, who are the not so good; we began voluntary attrition, some forced attrition, to sharpen up the work force responsiveness; we did a strategic realignment of our business plan, meaning developing a strategic plan, tying it into a budget which allocates the resources to carry out the strategic objectives; and now we're working on performance measurement. If there's anything that's really exciting about the efficiency review, it's what we're going to do next, not what we've done already – that's exciting enough. What do I mean by next? We want to take certain components of this Organization and give them total freedom to carry out their business activities. For example – let me just illustrate, I'm not saying this would be it: We have a large conference service activity here. Are they competitive with the private market? Could they do the job better with less if we removed all of the regulations and red tape that historically go along with it?

LITTLEJOHNS: So you answer your own question.

CONNOR: Yes, that's right.

LITTLEJOHNS: So the answer is yes.

CONNOR: Absolutely. This is an experiment that's worth considering, and we're going to consider it as we get into the next phase of the efficiency review. We call them executive agencies, and we borrowed that term from the British similar exercise of reinventing government.

LITTLEJOHNS: But that's going to involve firing a huge number of people, isn't it?

CONNOR: Not necessarily. The answer will come back as to how the programme manager thinks he can do the job given to him; in other words, how he can meet rigorous performance standards, with less cost and more freedom. That's a challenge.

MENON: You've mentioned that the UN has drawn from the experience of several national Governments. Now, of course, there's a cardinal difference between national Governments and the UN, which is that the UN has an international civil service, governed by rules of impartiality and of independent operation quite different from national services. And in your first report you've actually highlighted this. In the letter of transmittal you say one of the things we have not considered is the maintenance of the independence of the international civil service, which is an important matter to be considered. In what you've just described, in your attempt to give independence to programme managers, how will you preserve the essential quality of the international civil service? How will they maintain their independence?

CONNOR: Okay. Let me first correct the way you used one term, because I like to say it in my accountant's precise term. We're trying to get our people to manage their resources, not administer them—a very proactive, leadership type of involvement. I believe that the cornerstone of that is the international civil service. We recruit the best and the brightest. We haven't done a good job of training them. Skill qualifications have deteriorated, and we have to remake a lot of that. I think that's going to enhance the independence of the international civil servant rather than compromise it. There's one difference between our activity and the 185 Member States: They only have one master to answer to, themselves; we've got all 185 of them, all talking in different ways. That independence, so that we can function and do our job, is very important. If we compromise that by doing favours to this one, or non-favours to that one, I think we've got a real problem. So instilling professionalism, the ability to stand on your feet and say, hey, I'm working for this organization, I'm not working for a bunch of Member States individually with different objectives, that's important to managerial freedom.

MENON: For instance, just to take it to a more specific level: The Department of Conference Services is one of the largest operations in the UN. It buys a lot of services, it prints a lot of material, so it actually is very locally rooted. Wherever it operates is where it is going to contract out. The major centres of UN operation are all in a few developed countries. Now, if you give programme managers the writ to be efficient in terms of contracting out, going to the lowest bidder, obviously all the contracts would go to the local -- or the majority of contracts would go to the local bidders, which you have in a few countries.

CONNOR: We have great quality in our interpretation and translation services here; we're not going to compromise that, we're going to enhance it. You say that the paper flow controls a lot of things. We're trying to get rid of the paper flow. 270,000 UN documents, in all official languages, are now being entered into the Internet. We can retrieve them

wherever we are. We are doing remote translation. When all of the participants met in Beijing and looked at documents that were on the agenda—

LITTLEJOHNS: That's for the Women Conference, you're talking about.

CONNOR: That's right, a year ago. When they met in Beijing and looked at the document, that had been translated not in Beijing, but in Geneva and New York. When I presented the Efficiency Board report to the ambassadors here earlier this week, I told them that they were part of an experiment. Those of them sitting in Vienna and Geneva and listening to me and watching me speak in New York, the interpretation of my New York voice was being done in Vienna and Geneva. We don't have to be in the same room or the same time zone as those we serve. That's what I mean by managerial freedom, ferreting out a better and a different and, we hope, a cheaper way to do the service that is absolutely essential.

CROSSETTE: To stay on the hardware for a little while, it seems like buried in much of the Efficiency Report and a lot of things that come out of your office is the word technology, that the UN is—perhaps you could talk a little bit about how far behind the UN might have been on technology. And you've mentioned a few of the things you've been doing, and maybe there are more that are coming. And these things are—are they?—they're automatically cost saving, and perhaps more efficiency producing?

CONNOR: Every project, you kind of look at it as a new step out, maybe a new toy if you want to really laugh about it a little bit, Barbara. But when we started the new computer system half a dozen years ago, it was to be a big bookkeeping machine. As the projects and the needs identification phase took place, it began to evolve into a management information project. The platform on which the IMIS system, which is what our acronym is, that platform is the newest platform in the computer field. The last thing in the world you want to do is to have a faint heart if you're putting in a major computer system, the ups and downs. Takes years, takes lots of money. This one worked and, as a result, some of the things we hoped to achieve are now being achieved. A programme manager pushes a button, he knows right then and there how much of his budget he has spent and how much he has not spent. Sounds simple. Why wouldn't he have it? Because there are millions of transactions that lead up to that conclusion. That's management information; we didn't have it before. There are people reductions through technological advancements, no question about that. You just look around the building, you see very senior executives preparing their own memos on their word processor computers. Years ago that would have been—

LITTLEJOHNS: Do you prepare your own memos?

CONNOR: No, I'm one who does not!

[LAUGHTER]

CROSSETTE: I think in the diplomatic missions there's more of this too. Some of the smaller missions have found that the Ambassador himself can do a lot more work with the help of a computer than he perhaps could have done or she could have done before.

CONNOR: So we've reduced the ratio of secretaries to executives at the same time as we've also realigned the ratio of computers to people. Our goal is one-on-one for professional staff. You mentioned—I think we've really eased the problem of the missions. They can now dial up—

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean missions in the field?

CONNOR: No, I'm talking about the Member States missions, the ones that surround the UN—

LITTLEJOHNS: The diplomatic missions in New York.

CONNOR: —here in New York or in Vienna or in Geneva. A young third secretary starting his day can tune into the UN Home Page, he doesn't have to look at a piece of paper that tells him what's going on because that's been available to him for a day or so. He can see what his day is going to look like, because he has to cover this meeting or that meeting, he's got to consult with his capital—oh, what about the paper to consult with the capital? He makes another button click, and he's got that paper. He also knows that his capital, because we've tied in the optical disk system—another technological advance—to the Internet, and they're both looking at the same thing at the same time. So he gets his capital-based instructions at the same time that he looks at it for the first time, converses with them, obviously, so that the position that his country is going to take is well known to both parties. We've really, really relieved a lot of the tedious flipping of pages, underlining, all that. It's all gone.

We've also made it interesting for libraries. We had 200,000 inquiries a day from schools, from libraries, from other sources, for UN information. What's the rainfall problem? What's going on in the Security Council? They're in the Internet now too.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Joseph Connor, UN Under-Secretary-General for Administration and Management. What you say about the Internet is all very well, Mr. Connor, if I may say so, but, you know, everybody—well, it seems like almost everybody in the United States is on the Internet, but just the other day the Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, said that the Internet has largely left the third world out in the third world. How do you deal with third world missions who may be reluctant to adopt the kind of technologies that you're talking about?

CONNOR: Well, I think it's a cost benefit analysis, too.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm sorry, it's what?

CONNOR: It's a cost benefit analysis that you make with them. The smaller countries, developing countries, have very limited staff here. They're stretched very far to cover all the things that they have to cover. Technology gives them a chance to better plan their schedules so that they go to the important things. We've installed the optical disk system at over a hundred missions already, and we're proceeding. Frankly, it wouldn't be a bad buy for the Organization if there are Member States who can't do it to do it for them. We'd get rid of more piles of paper if everybody is both on the Internet and connected to the optical disk system. And that's a good payback for everybody. Sometimes you have to spend a little money to make a lot more money. And I think Member States see that. That's what we're trying to get through in this Efficiency Board report. Technology is one thing, but there are other things you can do, just common sense. And those instances are replete in that study.

MENON: You know, as someone who uses the Internet and has made good use of your printed documents—as a journalist, I have to know what's in your documents to write about them—it seems to me that there's a fundamental confusion here between what the Internet can do and what it can't do. If you upload 270,000 documents on the Internet, someone can—a researcher can find out quite easily by doing a search what documents there are of interest to him. He cannot possibly on the Internet read them all, especially if he wants to do a quick skim, as is very essential when reading UN documents because they're not concentrated doses of information, they're—in fact you have to search through quite a lot of chaff to find a few grains. So in a situation like that, the Internet is virtually useless, because you cannot scroll through a 40, 50-page document with the same ease with which you can flip through them. You can flip through a 50-page document in about 10 minutes; to scroll through a 50-page document and find out what it says will take considerably longer, and especially if you want to print it out.

CONNOR: Let me pose that question, because it's a real good problem. We've fallen into a terrible habit in this Organization of writing everything that we know from day one about an issue in a paper, because it's much easier to just repeat what was in last year's paper and then throw in the two or three paragraphs that are relevant to the issue that is current. They come in somewhere in the middle, and you're right, you've got to search forever. But the Internet should make it possible for us to move to a historical document, the background, while using a more current approach on the current issues. We're trying to figure out exactly how to do that so that we—you could be deluged just because information is now more readily available; we've got to figure out a way to make it selective rather than all-encompassing. I don't have the answer yet. But it is one of the 400 efficiency issues that we're working on. Because we know that in the five-step process of preparing an

information document, whether it's on paper, on the Internet, wherever it is, that the thing that we have given less attention to is step number one, which is defining exactly what are the key issues. One of the Member States experts loaned to us to do this told us that in his country no cabinet paper is ever more than two pages. What a marvellous life this world would be if we only had two pages to deal with.

MENON: It's not enough to beat around the bush, which is very necessary at the UN!

[LAUGHTER]

CONNOR: It's a small country. Maybe that's the reason.

CROSSETTE: Are you going to be taking this message of yours in any organized way to the General Assembly this year? And particularly we have a General Assembly President who really wants to cut through waste of time, waste of energy and money, and even long lunches. It would be with the message that you may find many savings and cut back on many things, but this is going to be no use at all if Member States meeting in these Assemblies each year then go ahead and create new departments or spending a quarter of a million dollars taking a conference to the western Pacific, or doing things that don't seem to make sense.

CONNOR: We've done, in my opinion – of course, this is a self-serving statement! – a pretty good job on sharpening up the management. We've got a lot yet to do, but I think the basic framework is in place. But the real appetite that creates documents and meetings and conferences – the Secretariat never calls a meeting!

LITTLEJOHNS: And long speeches.

CONNOR: We don't call those meetings! I think the President, the new President of the General Assembly is very much targeted in the right direction. It is time for the high level groups to report back their conclusions, their action plan, not their discussion memos, of how the General Assembly reforms itself – that's a Member States effort; how the Security Council is going to be focused and formed in the future; how the financial situation is going to be set right; and how some of the other mega-issues that only Governments can resolve are going to be resolved. And the timeframe is absolutely essential. I think we've done our part.

CROSSETTE: But is it ever possible, when you're up against these diplomatic pressures, do you think this Organization will always be a little different from a corporation?

CONNOR: Oh, I knew that the day I walked in the door.

[LAUGHTER]

LITTLEJOHNS: I'll bet you did!

CONNOR: But it's—yes. No legislative process will ever be the epitome of efficiency. There are just too many compromises that one has to make. You know, my background was not in a corporation, it was in a partnership—4,000 of them. I had one vote. It took a little bit longer to get consensus.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Connor, an article in The New York Times some months ago, which no doubt you are familiar with, has the headline, "The UN's Master Juggler: An Accountant Copes with Deadbeats and Bad Debt", referring to the financial crisis in the UN. Tell us a bit about the current situation. Is the UN still as deeply in debt as it was when this article was written? And, if not, how has the situation improved?

CONNOR: Well, we've exceeded all expectations. We're worse off than we were then. We've borrowed today about $100 million from our peace-keeping funds to keep the regular budget going.

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean today as we record this programme?

CONNOR: Today. That's right. By the end of the year we will have borrowed $245 million. We say borrowing; we don't go to a bank, we don't have a credit card, we just raid the peace-keeping funds, which were appropriated for other purposes. And how do we do that?

LITTLEJOHNS: And you do that by computer too, I suppose.

CONNOR: Mechanically. But how do we do it substantively? We simply don't pay our bills. And the group of creditors we don't pay are the Member States who have provided troops and equipment.

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean the countries which have provided troops, yes.

CONNOR: Yes, we owe 90 of those Member States an aggregate of about $700 million, a number that isn't going to go down until we collect from a shorter list of Member States, and one in particular, the overwhelming number that is owed to us. Today that number is $2.8 billion.

LITTLEJOHNS: And how much of that is owed by this one State, which of course is the United States?

CONNOR: Yes. Of the regular budget portion, about 75% of the amount due is owed by the United States, and of the peace-keeping, about 55%. So you blend it together in the respect as to the actual amounts, and you're around 56, 57, 58% of the total is due from one Member State. We hope to get a little monies from them soon, and we certainly are desperate for it.

MENON: You know, the next phase of your efficiency review you go into the area of actually looking at cross-sectorial issues. In other words, you're looking at issues of turf, which are very dear to the hearts of bureaucratic dukes and various rulers of this system.

How are you going to get any kind of efficiency past the vested interests that now control the system?

CONNOR: You always find vested interests. I guess we're going to have some trade-offs. In phase two, we make an enormous managerial change. This Organization grew up in a very centralized time when at the top they controlled everything. Today, I even have to approve an airfare change of $67 because somebody couldn't find a tourist ticket and had to go business class. That's ridiculous. Everybody delegates up. We're turning that around and delegating down. That's the right way to go. Decentralization. That's been our objective all along. We're going to have lots of willing participants in the programme managers when we say to them, you can hire, and you can promote, and you can assign, and you can evaluate. The top part will merely set policy, issue guidelines, and check up from time to time. We're pushing the work down into the Organization. Most people like to be in charge of their operation. We've gone through 50 years here where a programme manager was responsible for delivering the output, but somebody else told him who were the staff members, and all the other ancillary features that are essential to producing that report or that exercise.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Connor, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**. Our guest has been Joseph Connor, UN Under-Secretary-General for Administration and Management. He was interviewed by Bhaskar Menon of the International Documents Review and Barbara Crossette of The New York Times.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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